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Key Points

◆ **The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) uses a combination of intimidation, military might, and digital propaganda to project power militarily, economically, politically, and informationally.**

◆ **ISIS runs a sophisticated and multidimensional social media campaign, exploiting it as a weapon of war to intimidate, spread official messages, recruit, fundraise, network, and justify its gruesome acts.**

◆ **ISIS has been emboldened by the borderless nature of the region and the clash of religious and secular sub-identities in Iraq.**

◆ **The United States needs to develop a comprehensive digital strategy that is slicker, faster, and more nimble than ISIS's to fight the insurgency.**

A Time to Tweet, as Well as a Time to Kill: ISIS's Projection of Power in Iraq and Syria

by Heather Marie Vitale and James M. Keagle

On June 29, 2014, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant or the Islamic State),[1] a Sunni jihadist group with the capability of a paramilitary, established an Islamic caliphate. With 10,000 militants, the group took territory and achieved a goal that rival terrorist group al Qaeda has pursued for decades. Yet how did a group with relatively few fighters accomplish so much?

ISIS and its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, have learned lessons from past insurgents and leaders. In the implementation of its campaign, the group has used strategic tools to project military, economic, political, and informational power to the local, regional, and global community. From exploiting the sectarian divide to gain support, to manipulating political and social media to inflate its appearance of strength, to recruiting disaffected Sunnis and Muslim youth of the world through social media, ISIS has proved to be a new class of insurgency.

ISIS, however, has projected the most power and shown the most innovation with technology and media. It demonstrates a masterful understanding of effective propaganda and social media use, producing a multidimensional global campaign across multiple platforms. ISIS has used these platforms to exhibit intimidation, networking, recruitment, justice, and justification. It continues to spread its anti-Western, pro-jihadi messages to vulnerable populations using viral videos made to look like video games. Yet its skill is best displayed on Twitter where it has garnered tens of thousands of followers across dozens of accounts, eliciting feedback from average supporters.

The deterioration of the Syrian and Iraqi states further enabled ISIS's expansion of power. With the civil war in Syria and the inflamed sectarian tensions

		Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188

Report Documentation Page

1. REPORT DATE **OCT 2014**	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED **00-00-2014 to 00-00-2014**

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
Defense Horizons. Number 77, October 2014	5b. GRANT NUMBER
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)	5d. PROJECT NUMBER
	5e. TASK NUMBER
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **National Defense University,INSS,300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair,Washington,DC,20319**	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER

9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**	**Same as Report (SAR)**	**12**	

in Iraq, ISIS had little to exploit in order to assert itself. Given the lack of strong state leadership, increases in sectarian violence, and the abundance of porous borders, an insurgent uprising was inevitable.

ISIS currently threatens the United States. As the group continues to focus on recruiting foreign fighters from the West, the U.S. homeland, its assets abroad, and those of its allies remain at risk. The United States thus must do what it can to counteract ISIS's projections of power and propaganda. By launching a slicker and proactive digital campaign to draw attention and followers away from ISIS, the United States could help prevent more people from joining the fight.

Chronology and Background

In the 1970s, the United States pursued a policy known as "dual containment" in an attempt to achieve stability in the Gulf region. The end chapter of that included the pursuit, capture, and subsequent execution of Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Since then, the United States has been wrestling with options that can restore a balance of power in the region. This task includes finding

Figure 1. Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916

some adequate check on Iranian power. Part of the dilemma has been reconstructing Iraq economically, militarily, and politically. We must understand the Syria of today in this context.

The current conflict is complex due to the interconnected nature of the region. Iraq, Syria, and Iran all have long and contentious histories with one another. Arguably, the current conflict in al-Sham can be traced back to the declining days of the Ottoman Empire. Toward the end of World War I, Great Britain and France secretly devised a plan to partition the empire. This produced the infamous Sykes-Picot Agreement (officially known as the Asia Minor Agreement), which divided the greater Arab region (including modern day Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon) into neocolonial spheres of influence. The United States initially opposed this agreement based on its Allies' furtive diplomacy, as well as a stated belief in the right to national self-determination. Great Britain and France attempted to impose their views of political legitimacy on the region with Sykes-Picot.[2] This was opposed by President Woodrow Wilson, and ever since the United States has been reluctantly supporting borders that are increasingly maligned with ethnic, religious, and other factional forces. To many Arabs, the Sykes-Picot Agreement represents a Western betrayal and the first in a series of intrusions.

Many saw the American invasion of Iraq in 2003 as another Western intrusion, one that dramatically increased sectarian tensions. Iraq had been a Shia majority country led by Saddam, a Sunni Ba'athist. The Sunnis were marginalized politically, socially, and economically once Saddam was overthrown. This increased the insurgency as disaffected sheikhs and tribespeople resented the new political order and foreign occupation of lands. This insurgency grew to become al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Sectarian violence came to a head in 2006, where 30 to 40 attacks occurred daily in the western Al Anbar Province.[3]

In early 2007, the Bush administration deployed an additional 20,000 to 30,000 troops to Iraq—a decision
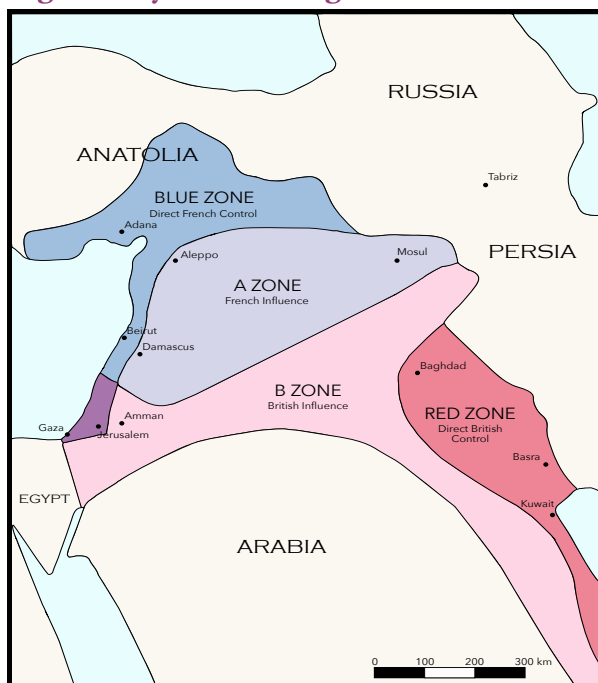
commonly referred to as "the surge." The troop surge managed the increase in sectarian violence. The Anbar Awakening, the preexisting U.S. operation in Anbar, ran in tandem with the surge. U.S. forces worked with the Sunni tribes of the province to fight against AQI. These coalitions of local security forces, known as the Sahwa or the Sons of Iraq, stood more for the rejection of AQI than the reception of U.S. objectives. The Sahwa proved crucial to the sharp reduction in sectarian violence after March 2007. Anbar Province was officially transferred back to the Iraqi government on September 1, 2008.

The region started to erupt again in December 2010 as the Arab Spring movement spread from Tunisia to Egypt and beyond. Civil protests against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad began in March 2011, but after violent government crackdowns, devolved

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into civil war. The opposition was initially comprised of groups such as the al-Nusra Front and the Free Syrian Army. However, members of the AQI regrouped and regained strength in Syria and mounted an independent offensive of both sides. AQI became the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham in 2012. ISIS grew more powerful due to the porous border between Syria and Iraq and the spillover from the civil war.

Identity

The issue of self-identity in the Middle East complicates the situation due to the sociopolitical and ethnic structures within the region. One's identity informs allegiances to country, institutions, and norms. Within the Middle East, individuals typically avow a layered identity

of pan-national, national, and subnational. For example, an Iraqi may view himself or herself as simultaneously Arab, Iraqi, and Sunni. The complicated nature manifests when questioning which sub-identity becomes the individuals' primary identity and driving force.

Relating to a primary identity at a higher level, pan-national or national, could bring greater unity. Believing oneself to be Iraqi or Arab first highlights the general similarities over the base differences that primary subnational identities accentuate. However, in practice, connections to national identity, and its subsequent institutions, tend to be flimsy at best.[4] Whether privately or publicly, many people in the region tend to primarily identify with their subnational identity, be it Sunni, Shia, Christian, or Kurd.[5] This practice features predominantly in Syria and Iraq.

Strong subnational identities tend to be divisive and lead to violence and conflict. These divisions correspond with the crisis in Syria and Iraq, a crisis largely fueled by sectarian tensions. ISIS, a Sunni jihadist organization, actively targets Shia in its military campaign to avenge its feelings of marginalization. The subnational divide instills ISIS with more power, one of the group's greatest tools.

The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham

Background. The Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham is a violent offshoot of al Qaeda known for its brutal tactics and crimes against civilians. Ayman al-Zawahiri, head of al Qaeda Central, distanced himself from the organization as early as 2007 because of these tactics. Instead of following Zawahiri's prescribed slow strategies of societal embeddedness to rally support, ISIS does the opposite by pushing a harsher strategy of violence and risking the loss of public approval.

ISIS (or AQI) initially manifested out of the turmoil surrounding the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and grew as the sectarian tensions mounted. The insurgent group opposed foreign occupation and integrated high-profile attacks of civilian contractors and aid workers into

Figure 2. Sunni and Shia Muslim Distribution

its strategy. Its targeting of Shi'ites was a major contributing factor in the Iraqi sectarian civil war that peaked in 2007. The group's ranks greatly diminished from the U.S. troop surge and the Sahwa's counterterrorism efforts. However, ISIS mounted a comeback due to the institutional marginalization of Sunnis by the government of Nouri al-Maliki, and the civil uprising in Syria. Sectarian attacks increased again in Iraq in 2012 after the United States had fully withdrawn from the country.[6]

Instruments of Power. ISIS's campaigns in Syria and Iraq have been remarkable for the group's application of four instruments of power: military, economic, political, and informational. Under the direction of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS advanced common jihadist ideas in a short period to achieve what no other insurgency has been able to do: establish an Islamic caliphate. Combining innovative technological strategies with strong force, intimidation, and financial resources, ISIS projects power.

Military Power. ISIS's surge through northern Iraq greatly affected its projection of power on global, regional, and local communities. This surge became notable for

several reasons: its short length, the relative number of forces in comparison to the Iraqi forces, and the ability to adapt on the battlefield. ISIS made great gains in a short time with about 10,000 troops using intimidation and traditional and social media to inflate its power. Its gains came somewhat easily due to the ineffectiveness of the Iraqi army, as 4 of 14 divisions "virtually abandoned their posts, stripped off their uniforms and fled when confronted in cities such as Mosul and Tikrit by militant groups."[7] Although the problems with the national army are representative of a larger endemic problem of broken leadership, morale, and systems, ISIS could still take advantage of the situation.

After the Iraqi troops abandoned their weapons, the insurgents were able to retrieve many American- and Western-made weapons. ISIS held several parades and made propaganda videos to show off its spoils as a way to further project military power and to humiliate the United States and its allies for its past efforts in Iraq. The insurgents transformed into more than a terrorist group, but a full-blown military. As *Washington Post* foreign affairs writer Terrence McCoy wrote, "What was recently

a ragtag cadre of former al-Qaeda operatives has now morphed into a transnational, fully militarized and very rich operation. . . . It makes al-Qaeda look like a bunch of wannabe jihadists."[8] This is in part due to a covert Central Intelligence Agency train-and-equip program in Jordan where the U.S. Government believed that it was secretly ramping up aid to the "moderate" Syrian rebels. Only the truly prescient saw that this training would produce a cadre that might ultimately join the ISIS fighting force.[9]

The group's gains in the northern Iraqi towns of Sinjar, Wana, and Zumar, as well as its advances into Kurdistan and Lebanon, demonstrate ISIS's military might. The ability to push back the Kurdish peshmerga stands as a significant example due to the strong training and substantial weaponry of the latter forces. The recent seizure of the hydroelectric dam in northern Iraq highlights the inadequacies of the Iraqi army in the matchup with ISIS militarily. This calls into question any U.S. military action to address options on the ground. Even General Martin Dempsey, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, most recently warned against "'precipitous' military action and said that the United States 'should take the longer view' on how to roll back the Islamic State fighters."[10]

Economic Power. ISIS's main forms of economic power come from its other types of power. The group took control of some facets of oil production and supply through force and actively fundraises through social media. Currently, ISIS loots oil from pipelines, fields, and storage tanks within its Iraqi territory and sells it to smugglers and intermediaries in Iraqi Kurdistan for $26 a barrel. Some Kurds then refine it and sell it for $63 a barrel. These operations are lucrative, providing the insurgent group with a million dollars per day. The group also sells oil and liquid gas from Syrian fields, but more for internal purposes as Syrian oil is lower in overall quality.[11]

ISIS uses force to extort funds through taxes from local businesses and, as of late, has threatened Iraqi Christians and other religious minorities who refuse to convert to Islam with a nonconversion tax. It also sells

electricity from its captured power plants in Syria. While these current practices bolster its bottom line, they do not do much to rally support from the local community. Only the sale of electricity helps to provide services in its controlled territory, but likely not enough to counterbalance the other projections of economic power through force. The black market and limited effectiveness of the U.S. sanctioned regime toward Iran suggest that this instrument will be circumscribed in its application toward a nonstate such as ISIS.

Political Power. ISIS's ultimate political power to date comes from its ability to assert its claims for an Islamic caliphate under sharia law in its occupied territories. Although it took the area with military might and technological savviness, its political power and ability to work with local Sunni tribes and militants

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strengthened its aims to install the caliphate. Experts say that there are as many as 16 Sunni Arab groups working in Mosul beside ISIS, including former Ba'athists. These base alliances, however, are unlikely to last; ISIS does not want to share power, and each faction does not hold the same objective. Some of the groups have already started to splinter in response to the radicalism engendered by ISIS.[12]

The challenge to the continued power projection will be the Islamic State's transition into a bureaucratic institution. Although governing in Syria, providing some services and implementing a sharia-based government, there are many barriers to sustainability. Fractions to the Sunni base, a rise in an Iranian-backed Shia militancy,

and the demand to provide continual and improved services for local communities could and likely will challenge ISIS. A fraction or rise of a Shia militancy may cause more violence or upheaval, whereas a failure to provide adequate services will precipitate the loss of support. Both or either could be a blow to ISIS's mid- to long-term power or general structures.

The weakness of the Nouri al-Maliki government was, and uncertainty regarding the Haider al-Abadi government is all about inclusiveness, or lack thereof. This has made channeling military support problematic, but also calls into question whether such an instrument of power can have any effectiveness whatsoever.

Informational Power. ISIS's handle on the dissemination of information and propaganda is perhaps its greatest strength, and strongest contribution to its growth in power. The group has embraced social media as a weapon of war, using it to spread official messages, recruit, fundraise, and network.[13] Its campaigns have the

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benefit of being widespread and multidimensional, bearing a massive effect. Other revolutionary or insurgent campaigns have not been quite as global or allowed for the same level of popular feedback or interaction. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini built revolutionary fervor in the 1970s by recording speeches on cassette tapes and distributing them widely throughout the mosques and bazaars in Iran, but spouted a unidirectional message. Other local jihadist movements have grown through meetings in mosques, but despite the opportunities for multidimensional input, they fail to make an impact outside of their immediate communities. Even in the digital age, insurgent groups such as al Qaeda have not adopted social media to the same extent that ISIS has. In the past,

groups used closed, password-protected online forums that do not foster growth or power in the same way.

Instead, ISIS uses its propaganda machine to enhance its power projection by instilling fear, lauding objectives, glorifying jihad, and even exaggerating themselves in traditional media. Its chosen platforms and viral style of messaging have a broad reach and enable multidimensional communication, exponentially spreading and enhancing its aims.

Masters of Messaging, Technology, and Social Media

ISIS employs its communications and social media campaigns in an exceptionally professional and sophisticated manner. Its propaganda, recruitment, and information operations are well conceived, slickly produced, and strategically circulated. The group has constructed interdependent networks for fast, real-time responses, and learned to adapt readily to adverse events, such as online account closures. ISIS displays a clever understanding of the media, allowing for innovation, manipulation, and exploitation of the message. The group's immensely effective digital jihadist campaign set the new precedent for Islamic groups worldwide.

Messaging. ISIS's aims are not unique. It sought to establish an Islamic caliphate across the region based on an extreme interpretation of sharia law for all Muslims. It partially accomplished this objective in a majority of Syria and Iraq, but still seeks to expand its territory. The group called for an official holy war, and demanded that Muslims worldwide pledge their allegiance to the caliphate and to al-Baghdadi. Despite the rhetoric supporting all Muslims, however, ISIS's central leadership continues to speak ill of the Shia, deeming them heretics and deserving of death. The group opted to transcend nationalism in an effort to attract global support, but continues to push the sectarian divide. This contradictory sentiment appears prevalently in official statements from the Islamic State. In an early release from official spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, he calls for unity, speaking highly of abandoning nationalism for

the cause, yet still mentions the general humiliation of the Shia. In the statement, al-Adnani concludes, "We ask Allah [the Exalted] to make [Ramadan] a month of victory, honor, and consolidation for the Muslims, and make its days and nights a curse for the *rafidah* [Shia], the *sahwat* [Awakening councils, Sons of Iraq], and the *murtaddin* [apostates]."[14] He makes it evident that the Islamic caliphate is not for all Muslims but those who follow the teachings of ISIS's version of sharia, further illustrating the stark divide along subnational identity lines in Syria and Iraq.

ISIS's other primary anti-Western messages are similarly not unique, but are tried and true. Given the role of the United States and its allies in Iraq and the region as a whole, the West makes an easy target of derision and common rallying point in recruitment. For ISIS, the West is a collection of oppressors: those who impose colonial borders, those who do not believe in Allah, and those who fight Islam. In this framing, it becomes easy to increase forces with the levels of disaffected Sunnis in the region and alienated Muslim youth in the world.

Technology Innovation. "Dawn of Glad Tidings," a Twitter application, has been ISIS's primary technological innovation to date. The app connected a supporter with the group's main communication arm as it posts tweets on a user's behalf. Before the Android store removed it for violating terms of service, at its height the app posted 40,000 tweets in 1 day from the battlefield using countless users' accounts. Many organizations use this type of app to tweet on a user's behalf to rally support for campaigns frequently. However, the innovation comes from ISIS's intense usage of the app in such a calculated way. Its strategic use of hashtags in these tweets caused each to trend on Twitter, promoting further engagement of the topic and bringing more notice to the cause.[15] It can seamlessly draw more fighters to its movement by showing deaths, explosions, arrests, and perceived injustices to an instant worldwide audience. Dawn of Glad Tidings represented a tool that allowed ISIS to streamline and broaden its online communication as it built its movement. The removal of the app from the Android market

did not hamper its digital and social media efforts—it just forced further strategic innovation.

Social Media Communication and Recruitment. Arguably, ISIS makes the largest impact on Twitter. It holds about a dozen accounts from central leadership, all focused on different aspects: official messages from leaders, recruitment, networking, intimidation, or religious themes. The al-Hayat Media Center maintains half of the pages and focuses on recruiting Westerners. The pages provide content in English, German, Danish, French, and Russian. The al-Battar Media Group pages centers on mobilization, and ISIS also maintains local pages to curry favor at home.[16]

> ## ISIS's strategic use of hashtags in these tweets caused each to trend on Twitter, promoting further engagement of the topic and bringing more notice to the cause

The main benefit of social media is the democratization of the messaging. Previously, other groups' jihadist messages only disseminated through official channels and by designated leaders. Now average supporters can positively contribute to this campaign by adding their own content, retweeting official tweets, or using popular hashtags. It enables the recruitment to be more sincere and the message to be richer as it comes from mujahideen on the battlefield instead of an isolated leader. Yet democratization has a downside; it also allows for the corruption or faction of ISIS's official messaging by activists with their own agendas, or by people co-opting and repurposing the content and hashtags for their own objectives. The group's campaigns have not been co-opted yet as its networks and online presence is strong. An effective faction or counter-campaign would require a groundswell of popular support.[17]

Social media analytics of past hashtag campaigns, particularly #AllEyesOnISIS, indicate that about 20

percent of the tweet volume in a given period belongs to a base number of users. Therefore, a small number of people are driving the core of the output, which suggests that ISIS's communications are not completely grassroots or horizontal. However, this reinforces the group's high level of comprehensive strategy, as only about one-fifth of its Twitter audience drives the campaign with the remainder helping it to spread.

ISIS also attempted to repurpose established and innocuous hashtags to assert its power and expand its audience in untouched markets. It co-opted some

> **ISIS's presence on Ask.fm, a platform primarily used by teenagers, reinforces the idea that young men are the target audience, and the key to winning the fight**

of the World Cup hashtags, such as #Brazil2014 or #WC2014, in a strategic move to intimidate and recruit Westerners. Any Twitter user browsing those hashtags could find ISIS's tweets of brutality among the normal World Cup tweets. ISIS attempted to make the hashtags about them instead of the World Cup. The group seized the opportunity to release a video (accompanied by World Cup hashtags) called *There is No Life without Jihad*, depicting British jihadists already on the frontlines, in hopes of inspiring more to join them.[18] It also notoriously tweeted a picture of a severed head, saying, "This is our ball . . . it is made of skin. #WorldCup #WorldCup2014." The grotesque image went viral, and led to several account closures, but not before ISIS spread its image.

The group also uses the social photosharing platform Instagram as a means to share visually its message of injustice and jihad with the world. Instagram allows foreign jihadists to narrate personal stories or details of their daily lives. Among the plethora of photos of weapons, bullets,

or consequences of battle, there are images of jihadists enjoying food, adapting to life on the frontlines. There are even cat photos. These users represent the success of ISIS's campaign: recruited young foreign fighters, ready for combat, used as pieces of propaganda and intimidation to spread further the word of jihad.

Ground soldiers recruit through the relatively new platform Ask.fm. Geared toward teenagers, the site enables users to ask questions of other users anonymously. The tool becomes useful in its anonymity and allows would-be Western jihadists the chance to ask pertinent logistical questions, such as what they should bring, what kind of artillery they will receive upon arrival, and the best route to enter Syria. Fellow Western jihadists answer their questions, but when the answers require specificity, the soldiers transfer over to Kik, an anonymous instant messaging service.[19] Abu Abdullah al-Brittani (@AbuDujanaBritani) has been one of the primary contributors, but an American, Abu Turab (@abumuhajir1), and another Briton Abu Uthman al-Britani (@Uthaman) have been very active on the site as of this writing. The anonymity of Ask.fm and Kik deters undercover agents from finding the jihadists and adds personal touches for recruitment. Instead of waiting for foreign fighters to heed a general call, this gives those interested a chance to ask questions in a safe space. Moreover, the group's presence on Ask.fm, a platform primarily used by teenagers, reinforces the idea that young men are the target audience, and the key to winning the fight.

ISIS's social media accounts across all platforms (especially Twitter) are deleted only after they upload particularly gruesome posts. As a policy, the social networking companies do not proactively monitor user content and instead ask users to report instances of abuse or offensive matter. Any account closure, particularly on Twitter, does not amount to a loss; ISIS creates a new group with a similar user handle and regains its tens of thousands of followers within days. Its networks are so well connected and content interdependent that users do not have to work hard to discover new accounts. Trying to close every account would be time consuming, ineffective, and

fruitless.[20] In this way, the insurgents would always be able to stay ahead and control the message. Moreover, analysts in the Intelligence Community have stated that they want the accounts to remain online as they serve as the best tool for them to understand the group's motivations, strengths, tactics, networks, and hierarchies.[21] However, this leaves open the possibility that more Western jihadists will be recruited, reinforcing the threat to the United States. Therefore, the United States must proactively combat this with an even stronger, slicker, and faster counter-campaign to prevent this from happening.

ISIS's use of video represents its other effective form of propaganda and recruitment. Historically, jihadist movements adopted video content as an important part of their strategy, but ISIS's embrace of social media and youth culture gave these videos a new videogame-like quality. As with Twitter, ISIS uses YouTube and other video platforms to spread visual and often graphic messages of intimidation, religious justification, and recruitment. It used a video to show al-Baghdadi giving a public sermon soon after the establishment of the Islamic caliphate. It enhanced his profile and brought him out of the shadows. It also used video to decry the "imperial" Sykes-Picot Agreement by touring the now nonexistent borders to highlight its power.

Clanging of the Swords IV, a subtitled hour-long violent video, best exemplifies ISIS's use of video propaganda. It aims to ennoble the fight and bring in Western recruits. The well-produced video graphically depicts Shia deaths from gun battles, instant replays of explosions, and "earned justice" from targeted killings of Sahwa or Iraqi military officers. The explosions of buildings and vehicles, played on repeat and in slow motion, appear to be something from a Hollywood action film or a videogame such as *Call of Duty*. An exclamation of "*Allahu Akbar!*" ("God is great!") accompanies each death and explosion, repeating every instant replay. This further instills its message and objectives by creating a Pavlovian-like response of praising Allah for every violent action.

These repeated images do nothing but glorify ISIS's brutal acts, helping to make the group more appealing to younger people through the shine of editing and production. Current neuroscientific research suggests that teenagers' brains are wired differently than those of adults, as younger people lack the adult capacity for complex reasoning—and are thus more susceptible to emotional appeals. Similarly, teenagers' frontal lobes, the portion of the brain responsible for measuring consequences and morality of choices, do not fully form until one's 20s.[22] These differences indicate that younger people are less able to distinguish right from wrong and are more susceptible to coercion and suggestion than adults. While it may be a reach to suggest youth

> **historically, jihadist movements adopted video content as an important part of their strategy, but ISIS's embrace of social media and youth culture gave these videos a new videogame-like quality**

lack such basic capacities to discern right from wrong, current research would cause one to pause about the messaging and its target audience's receptivity. Given Western involvement in the region, and general global Islamophobia, there exists a higher incidence of disaffected Muslim youth who could be more attracted to these messages. The design of *Clanging of the Swords IV* and similar videos further underscores ISIS's targeting of young people to ensure its sustainability and long-term goals.

The video also prominently features imagery consistent with major messaging themes: foreign fighters ripping up passports while decrying borders, broad humiliation and brutalization of Shias and secularists, forced repentance and integration of Sahwa forces to avoid death, and veneration of al-Baghdadi and his leadership. These portions of the video are less to excite viscerally potential recruits but to entice, justify, and glorify further acts in the name of jihad and Allah. The forced repentance particularly bolsters its power,

as it depicts the "willing" conversion of many "traitors"; otherwise, they face death. Moreover, few jihadists mention dying or sacrificing oneself for the cause. For those disaffected youth, these images, paired with the soaring rhetoric of extremists, would be a powerful draw as they are nearly promised supremacy over the Shia, the unfaithful, and traitors. For those considering joining the jihad, pious appeals to Allah in the name of justice and victory in *Clanging of the Swords IV* become a draw: "Through [fighting], my religion has been strengthened and the tyrants have been humiliated. So rise up . . . to the path of the courageous."[23]

Aside from long-form videos, the al-Hayat Media Center creates the increasingly popular spate of short propaganda videos, mujatweets. These high-quality morsels average a minute in length and aim to portray the softer side of ISIS. One depicts ISIS fighters handing out ice cream and candy to overjoyed children (and ends with the kids yelling a jihadist chant); a restaurant owner in al-Raqqa affirming the improvement to the community's safety and general welfare since ISIS's arrival; a jihadi visiting the wounded in the hospital; a personal invitation to join from a French ISIS fighter; and an informal parade through a thriving market in al-Raqqa, where the soldiers brandish guns to the delight of children. The videos are short and well made, speaking to the youthful target audience. Some feature Western fighters, adjusted and flourishing in their new environs. They also show how prosperous al-Raqqa, the caliphate's de facto capital, remained under its leadership and government. Aside from appealing to Westerners for recruitment purposes, the mujatweets also serve to represent the caliphate's stability, prosperity, and strength of leadership. They attempt to counteract the gruesome content and press by proving the group's kindness and popularity and convince skeptics of its strength. If anything, ISIS seeks to prove that it is not a sinking ship and well in control of its current territory.

New and Old Borders

Currently, the Islamic caliphate and its immediate vicinity represent a borderless region. Even the Turkish border appears largely porous, despite the lack of complete ISIS control. This enables supplies, funds, and most importantly, jihadists from entering (or exiting) the territory with relative ease. Many have wondered what the map of the new region will look like, whether it will return to the Sykes-Picot status quo, adapt to the new lines of the Islamic caliphate as it stands, or perhaps follow ethno-religious lines.

The situation in al-Sham compares to the story of Humpty Dumpty: a fragile circumstance prone to fracture that cannot easily be repaired, despite everyone's best efforts. Therefore, one must consider how best to manage the situation in order to avoid refracture.

There are three possible scenarios of what a new regional map will look like: perfect, manageable, and a disaster. The perfect map remains unknown, but a disaster map likely resembles the Sykes-Picot status quo. After all this turmoil, no change will just lead to more jihadist upheaval in the future. A manageable map endures as a question as well. Many have advocated for a partitioned map based on sectarian lines. Although this might solve basic problems, this will only likely further enflame the sectarian divide and force a primary subnational identity as a national identity. This would be more complicated in mixed cities such as Baghdad, where partition would be difficult, if not impossible.

Recommendations

ISIS finds its main source of power through its projections. It manipulates social and mainstream media to appear more powerful militarily, economically, politically, and informationally. With a slick and proactive digital propaganda campaign, it will only continue to attract more followers if left unabated.

ISIS does remain a threat to the United States due to its appeal to Westerners. People with Western passports continue to arrive in Syria to train on a regular basis, and then could return to their home countries to spread jihad. While we cannot always prevent this from

happening, we can ramp up our efforts to try to dissuade these young men and women from going in the first place.

Launch a Strategic Counterpropaganda Campaign. Our recommendations focus on counterbalancing ISIS's power projections. ISIS revolutionized the usage of messaging; therefore, we must embrace these technologies and similarly exploit them. The United States needs a slicker, faster counterpropaganda campaign, not hokey or reactive but a step ahead or similarly attractive to the target audience. Our defense agencies must seize the initiative with our own powerful and focused narrative broadcast on these new communication mediums. Former press secretary and Fox News correspondent Dana Perino reinforced the idea of honing a digital strategy to combat this recruitment challenge on August 20, 2014, on *The Five*.[24]

The State Department already started a similar program on Twitter called "Think AgainTurn Away" (@ThinkAgain_DOS) that responds directly to users who tweet pro-jihadist content. Those behind the Think Again program respond with realistic information about the actions of the groups, ensuring those users understand the true gravity of their words. In a recent reply to a tweet about the *ummah* standing up for the oppressed Muslims and uniting to fight the enemies of Allah, Think Again wrote: "[N]o one in recent history has oppressed Muslims like #ISIS—That's why the majority of Muslims are united against its barbarism." While a strong step in the right direction, it remains reactive.

The Think Again campaign, or any similar campaign, should expand on its proactive content, similar to the mujatweets made by ISIS. It should target the same audience, developing its content to highlight more than the negative aspects of jihad and insurgent groups: the high probability of death, grave consequences, legal ramifications, brutality, and other stark realities glossed over by ISIS messaging. The messaging must strike a balance between condemnation and placidity to avoid sounding too much like a lecture. Excessive castigation would turn people off and not allow for engagement. The campaign should subtly promote Western values and efforts, and any videos should look like a videogame. The United States could enhance the use of frank photos and depictions of dead jihadists by

creating memes that could go viral and speak to a younger audience. It could also borrow imagery from a recent Iraqi television propaganda commercial where lions and eagles fight rats (the Americans and Iraqi forces battling the invading ISIS)[25] to make a symbolic and lighter meme. The content and form must be multidirectional so users engage with it instead of ignore it. The #No2ISIS hashtag campaign used by civilian activists could be an established platform to build on. The campaign should also expand its practice onto other platforms, including Facebook and Instagram, to ensure that it reaches as many youths as possible.

> ## messaging must strike a balance between condemnation and placidity to avoid sounding too much like a lecture

To accomplish this, the campaign will have to step outside of formal bureaucratic channels. The State Department has already begun this process by awarding a half-million dollar contract to a Virginia-based firm to run Think Again. This should be enhanced. With agency oversight, the campaign should be able to move forward to react in near real-time. The United States must be as nimble, if not more nimble, than ISIS's communications arm to deter and attract would-be jihadists from deploying to Syria.

Invest in Open Source Resources. Secondly, we recommend a greater investment in open source programs and social media tracking systems for intelligence services. The current crisis highlights the changing tide of warfare where a good deal of the battle has been fought online and in public. Intelligence analysts have been able to use the Internet and social media platforms to gather data about its targets on a grand scale. We will require greater investment in understanding social media analytics, platforms, and messaging. These expanded resources will best enable our defense forces to fight crises like these now and in the future.

These two steps could launch an approach that addresses terrorism at its roots—its message and recruitment

methods. While lethal force against known terrorists has a purpose, it comes too late to serve as the cornerstone of a winning strategy. Our values demand an increase focus on telling our story.

Notes

[1] The insurgent group most recently changed its name to Islamic State or IS; however, in this paper we refer to the group by its most common and colloquial name of ISIS.

[2] David Ignatius, "Rethinking Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points," *The Washington Post*, July 8, 2014.

[3] Jeff Seiken, "Anbar Awakening," in *The Iraq War Encyclopedia*, ed. Thomas R. Mockaitis, 13–16 (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2013).

[4] Jonathan Spyer, Syria Futures Roundtable, National Defense University, Washington, DC, July 14, 2014.

[5] Prominent Iraqi pollster Munqith al-Dagher found in a recent poll that both Sunni and Shia identify as Iraqi first, whereas the Kurdish do not. Anecdotal evidence finds the opposite to be true of Sunnis and Shia. This begs the question of public versus private identity. Munqith al-Dagher, "ISIL in Iraq: A disease or just the symptoms? A public opinion analysis," lecture at Freedom House, Washington, DC, June 26, 2014.

[6] Zachary Laub and Jonathan Masters, *Islamic State in Iraq and Greater Syria* (Washington, DC: Council on Foreign Relations, Updated June 12, 2014).

[7] Eric Schmitt and Michael R. Gordon, "The Iraqi Army Was Crumbling Long Before Its Collapse, U.S. Officials Say," *The New York Times*, June 12, 2014.

[8] Terrence McCoy, "Islamic State 'now controls resources and territory unmatched in history of extremist organizations,'" *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2014.

[9] See Greg Miller, "CIA Ramping Up Covert Training Program for Moderate Syrian Rebels," *The Washington Post*, October 2, 2013; and Tom Bowman and Alice Fordham, "CIA Is Quietly Ramping Up Aid To Syrian Rebels, Sources Say," National Public Radio, April 23, 2014. See also for further discussion Barry Donegan, "Did the US Train ISIS Rebels to Fight Against Syria?" *BenSwann.com*, June 18, 2014, available at <http://benswann.com/did-the-us-train-isis-rebels-to-fight-against-assad-in-syria/>; Garth Kant, "Dems, GOP Blast Obama War Plan," *WND.com*, September 18, 2014, available at <www.wnd.com/2014/09/dems-gop-blast-obama-war-plan/>; Melissa Melton, "You Do Realize that the US Funded and Trained ISIS, Right?" *FreedomOutpost.com*, August 23, 2014, available at <http://freedomoutpost.com/2014/08/you-do-realize-that-the-us-funded-and-trained-isis-right/>; and Aaron Klein, "Blowback! U.S. Trained Islamists Who Joined ISIS," *FreedomOutpost.*

com, June 17, 2014, available at <http://freedomoutpost.com/2014/08/you-do-realize-that-the-us-funded-and-trained-isis-right/>.

[10] David Ignatius, "Red alert on the Islamic State," *The Washington Post*, August 1, 2014.

[11] Gregory Gause III, *Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War*, Analysis Paper No. 11 (Doha, Qatar: Brookings Doha Center, July 2014).

[12] Denise Natali, *Iraq's Fragmentation and the Islamic State Threat*, Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) Trip Report (Washington, DC: INSS, July 23, 2014).

[13] Rita Katz, "Follow ISIS on Twitter: A Special Report on the Use of Social Media by Jihadists," *Insite Blog on Terrorism & Extremism*, SITE Intelligence Group, June 26, 2014, available at <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/entry/192-follow-isis-on-twitter>.

[14] Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, "This is the Promise of Allah," SITE Intel Group, available at <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/Jihadist-News/isis-spokesman-declares-caliphate-rebrands-group-as-islamic-state.html>.

[15] J.M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter," *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014.

[16] Katz.

[17] Shiraz Maher and Joseph Carter, "Analyzing the ISIS 'Twitter Storm,'" *War on the Rocks*, June 24, 2014, available at <http://warontherocks.com/2014/06/analyzing-the-isis-twitter-storm/>.

[18] Cahal Milmo, "Isis jihadists using World Cup and Premier League hashtags to promote extremist propaganda on Twitter," *The Independent* (UK), June 22, 2014.

[19] John Hall, "'Come and get your AK47, your grenades and your vest pack': British ISIS fighter lured underage jihadist away from his parents with travel advice on reaching Middle East," *The Daily Mail* (UK), June 24, 2014.

[20] Ronan Farrow, "Like. Share. Kill." *The Washington Post*, July 13, 2014.

[21] Colin Daileda and Lorenzo Franceschi-Bicchierai, "U.S. Intelligence Officials Want ISIL Fighters to Keep Tweeting," *Mashable.com*, July 11, 2014, available at <http://mashable.com/2014/07/11/us-wants-iraq-radicals-to-tweet/>.

[22] Jack Dickey, "The Antisocial Network," *Time*, June 26, 2014.

[23] *Clanging of the Swords IV*, LiveLeak video, 1:02:22, English subtitles.

[24] Dana Perino, "Reaction to savage murder of American journalist James Foley," *The Five*, Fox News, August 20, 2014, available at <www.foxnews.com/on-air/the-five/transcript/2014/08/20/reaction-savage-murder-american-journalist-james-foley>.

[25] Anti-ISIS Propaganda on Iraqi television, Al-Furat television via MEMRI, 00:56, English subtitles, available at <www.memritv.org/clip/en/4450.htm>.